



Rabbi Rachel Kort
Temple Beth El of South Orange County
Yom Kippur 5778

The Blessing of Community

My parents never told me why I should be Jewish. Instead, they raised me with rich Jewish experiences that invited me to discover why I should be Jewish for myself. I grew up eating Happy Meals in the temple sukkah, writing post-cards to my Ethiopian-Israeli pen pal, being counted in the *shiva minyan* after my bat mitzvah, and baby-sitting my way through high school to subsidize a summer trip to Israel. My family was comfortable living our Jewish life through osmosis in the densely Jewish suburbs of Detroit. Then we moved to Seattle to be closer to my mom's Polish Catholic family, where, for the first time, my parents felt the need to affiliate in order to feel Jewish. We leapt into synagogue life and the leadership of our *shul* became my extended Jewish family. I grew up around Shabbat tables filled with conversation about the issues facing our congregation and the global Jewish community and I was asked to share my opinion.

On the momentous event of revelation, as the Israelite's stood before Mt. Sinai and accepted the gift of Torah from God, the People of Israel famously announce, "*Kol asher diber Adonai na'aseh v'nishma*—All that God has said we will do and we will obey."ⁱ "*Na'aseh v'nishma*," literally "we will do and we will understand." Scholars have long noticed the strange order of the two verbs: surely the Israelites meant to say "we will understand the commandments and then do them." It would be foolish to agree to perform an act without knowing what it is. Yet the rabbis praise the Israelites for making such a commitment, concluding that the Israelites were agreeing to fulfill not only all the laws they had just heard, but all future commandments that God would give. According to the Talmud,ⁱⁱ the moment the Israelites utter "*na'aseh*" before "*nishma*," six hundred thousand angels come down from heaven and put two crowns on each Israelite's head, one for *na'aseh* and one for *nishma*. Not only do the angels come down to earth, but God compares the people of Israel themselves to angels, who are also described as fulfilling before understanding God's commands.

"*Na'aseh v'nishma*—Do first, understand later." Although I did not study this text until I was an adult, I learned the concept early on. Engagement in Jewish life was integral in shaping my individual identity. Through my experiences of Jewish life, I learned the importance of community, compassion, and inclusion. Through my experiences of Jewish life, I became to be a feminist, a Zionist, an advocate for peace, and a global citizen. *L'dor v'dor*, from generation to generation you might say. As a congregational rabbi, I have opportunities to translate the same message of Jewish empowerment that my parents and childhood community instilled in me.

Pastoral meetings are one such opportunity for empowerment. A relatively new member of our community, Rhonda Robinson approached me needing my help. Her daughter was getting married and asked her to write a blessing to read underneath the *chuppah*. "But Rabbi, what do you think they mean by 'give a blessing?'" Rhonda and I spent time together learning. In our tradition, blessings must

accompany action; they are more than just expressions of gratitude. Rhonda created a blessing for her children that articulated the ways that her daughter and son-in-law, as individuals, have worked to make the world a better place and what a blessing it is that the two of them are together. After the wedding, Rhonda shared with me that giving her daughter and son-in-law her blessing was one of the most powerful moments of her life.

Empowering others to take the lead in their Jewish lives is work that nourishes my soul and has been the most significant accomplishment for me as your rabbi here at Temple Beth El. Helping Edana Kartzinel, a mother in our community craft the words she would use to tell her twelve year old daughter that her father had passed away. Providing support to Josh and Dan Goldman with their marriage. Josh was raised at Congregation Eilat and attended Tarbut v'Torah. Dan was raised in China. The couple needed guidance on establishing their own authentic Jewish home while showing reverence to their parents and the traditions of both their families. A decade long attendee at our congregation's lay-led Torah study, Eddie Neuwirth, took advantage of a milestone birthday to share his take on Torah with his community for the first time; together, Eddie and I studied the *parasha* in the weeks leading up to his turn to lead.

This past December, after seeing a pair of swastikas etched at a favorite neighborhood park, Jenna Gerstner was unsure what to tell her two sons, Cole and Bryce. Jenna reached out to me for support and we agreed that instead of teaching her beautiful boys about the ugliness of racism, we would fill the park with a celebration of diversity and inclusion. At first, Jenna was a bit reluctant to extend the educational effort beyond her family. "You have to promise me, Rabbi Kort, that my famil won't be the only one that shows up at the park." Our Temple Beth El community partnered with the Orange County Islamic Foundation mosque and Shepherd of the Hills United Methodist Church. The result of the collaboration was "A Place for Every Family," a multifaith gathering to show children to respond to hate with love and inclusion. More than a hundred people showed up to the park. I joked with Jenna at the event, "Didn't I promise that you wouldn't be alone."

My partnership with congregants better allows for God's presence to be palpable when I offer my own blessings at a bar or bat mitzvah, at the graveside, or under a *chuppah*. But as wonderful as it is to offer you my blessings, it was a highlight of my career having Rhonda share with me how meaningful it was for her to give her daughter her own blessing. More often than not, it is you who bestow an abundance of blessing on me, your rabbi.

In the current American landscape, new types of institutions and communities are emerging to help meet the needs of American Jews. Some say that synagogues are outdated, but regardless of whether I am working in a congregational setting or not, I choose to be committed to synagogue community because I believe in the power of multigenerational community and have experienced creative innovation within the synagogue setting.

When I first came to Temple Beth El, parents shared in conversations with me, and with each other, a desire for their children to enjoy the support of Jewish friends, in order to respond to the reality of living in a community where Evangelical Christianity is the predominant religious voice. Our parents shared a

desire for their children to celebrate being Jewish at their temple. “*Na’aseh v’nishma*—Do first, understand later.” They wanted a shift in the focus of their children’s education from learning to doing. This created an opportunity to build innovative structures that nurture families’ Jewish engagement. Collaborating with lay partners, we transitioned our entire supplementary Sunday school to Shabbat.

In our Shabbat model of learning, I help our faculty utilize principles of Project-Based Learning, which provide opportunities for students to live their Jewish lives and strengthen the temple community. Each year, our 4th graders, whose curriculum focuses on Israel, invite our younger students to a Birthday Party for Israel around Israeli Independence Day where they teach about Israel through games they create with their teachers, like ‘Map of Israel Twister’ and ‘pin the note on the Kotel.’ This past year, I delighted in working with a handful of fourth graders who brought some of their favorite Israel birthday games to the JCC in Irvine to share with the greater Orange County community. As other congregation’s had Jewish professionals lead their Israel carnival booths, Temple Beth El offered our best and brightest leadership, our children.

Establishing community isn’t only a priority for our children. The members of Temple Beth El are incredibly proud of our community and you work hard to help create the community you get to enjoy. Last year, thirty congregants took a leap of faith with me and Rabbi K’vod and helped us launch our first Small Group Campaign. Thirty congregants offered to open their homes and host a Small Group experience where groups ranging in size from two to twelve met, learned from video materials that Rabbi K’vod and I created, and most importantly got to have discussions and get to know each other on a deeper level. After meeting for about six weeks, some groups disbanded, but others have continued to meet. One group chose a book to discuss while another is taking on social action projects. Some have continued to meet socially. In a famous debate in the Talmud,ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon argue: Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered, saying: Study is greater. The community sided with Akiva that study is greater than action because study leads to action. At Temple Beth El, study is an opportunity to build our community.

Throughout my life, I have found personal growth and comfort in a synagogue community. As an adult and as a rabbi, Temple Beth El is where my husband and I chose to celebrate the birth of our daughter, Galit, and it is where I turned for support after the death of my father. Our Temple Beth El community has intensified the joy of raising my daughter. At our monthly Jerusalem Shabbat service, as I hold Galit’s hand and we march behind the Torah scroll, Galit hugs a plush toy Torah. Our community puts their hands out to touch and kiss Galit’s little Torah. She is just one of many kids forming the Torah procession, but in the moment, along with the other kids, Galit feels special and loved by her extended Jewish Family. When my dad passed away, the Temple’s caring community helped bring together a *minyan* for me to have a space to recite *kaddish* for my dad during the week of shiva following his death. But the support extended long after a week. Our community has provided me with ongoing support and perspective on my loss. I was incredibly worried immediately after my dad died that I would forget him, but as I recited *kaddish* for my dad week after week the year following his death, and now for his *yartzeit*, I have learned from others who have lost a parent, some many decades ago, that my dad will always be present in my life.

“Na’aseh v’nishma—Do first, understand later.” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel^{iv} described Judaism as not a leap of faith but as a “leap of action.” As he put it, a person is asked to “do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does.” Jewish engagement opens a door to greater insight and more meaningful living.

One need not be a rabbi or a *macher* to feel the gift and support of community at Temple Beth El, but when one chooses to engage with our community, the blessings that come from being a part of community are amplified. It has been a blessing being a part of this sacred community for more than seven years. It will be hard to leave my Beth El family next summer, but I thank you for understanding my desire to spend more time with Dan and Galit. The blessing of our community doesn’t come from me, your rabbi, or Rabbi K’vod or Cantor Young or even Bonni Pomush, our beloved Executive Director. The blessing of the Temple Beth El is in each of you and I want to thank each of you for being a blessing in my life.

ⁱ Exodus 19:6

ⁱⁱ Shabbat 88a

ⁱⁱⁱ Kiddushin 40b

^{iv} *God in Search of Man*, p 283